

The Three-Deckers of Dorchester



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Three-Deckers of Dorchester: An Architectural Historical Survey

by

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PREFACE



A car windshield view of three-deckers above the highway.
Southeast Expressway at Columbia Road.

PREFACE

The three-deckers of Dorchester: you see them in the drive crossing the Neponset marshes into Boston, tall and narrow with their wooden porches peering above the Southeast Expressway (p. 1).^{*} You see them again beyond the limits of the downtown into South Boston, wooden porches perched high above concrete walls. They line their backs against the Red Line tracks to Ashmont and their fronts on the sandy beach at Malibu. They rise to meet the steeple of Meeting House Hill and stretch out towards Mattapan. The three-deckers are a large part of the identity of Dorchester and define its sense of place.

What are these three-deckers? As architecture, they are curious forms, part urban and part suburban. They look like apartments transformed into houses, or perhaps houses overgrown into apartments. They have the flat roofs of the city, but the wooden walls of the country. They appear as rowhouses transplanted into the suburbs.

And their porches, front and back. Tiers of porches, galleries of porches, decks of porches, for sitting down and looking out, with columns and railings on every floor. Verandahs and balconies high above the street, grandstand piazzas in the air. Always there are three porches in the back, one for each family. In front, fine decorated porches with grand columns and fancy railings, sometimes one, sometimes two, sometimes three stories high.

At times it seems that all Dorchester is three-deckers, and indeed a large part of it is. Over five thousand stand today, the largest collection anywhere. Rarely alone, often in pairs, usually in groups, three-deckers form entire neighborhoods extending as far as the eye

^{*} Photos were taken by the author.

can see. A hypnotic rhythm of repeated forms: porches and bays, shadow and light, detail and texture, an endless array of three-deckers, over the hills and across the plains of Dorchester they extend, from South Cove to Neponset, from Andrew Square to Lower Mills, from Uphams Corner to Adams Village, from Columbia Road to Gallivan Boulevard, from Boston Street to Blue Hill Avenue, from Ronan Park to Franklin Field, from Popes Hill to Mount Bowdoin. Nowhere else is there such a landscape of three-deckers. It is one of Dorchester's glories.

The three-decker is democratic architecture. It was built to give the average family the benefits of suburban life while living close to city jobs. It was neither tenement nor mansion, but rather good solid housing. It was large enough to raise a host of children around the dining room table, but small enough to keep a pot of flowers on the back porch.

The three-decker was affordable, for the new family who rented the top floor, for the owners who occupied the middle floor, and for the retired couple downstairs whose rent paid the mortgage. It was attractive; each floor had its own parlor bay and own piazza, its own stained glass and oak pantry, and its own view. This was the appeal that drew the families out on the trolleys into Dorchester.

Today the three-decker is still democratic, still affordable, and still attractive architecture for those who want the benefits of the suburbs while living close to the city - including the porches!

DEVELOPMENT OF THE THREE-DECKER

Three-Decker Roots

The roots of the three-decker lie deep within the traditions of Boston, and are as ingrained as the city's accents. Its origins can be traced to the Colonial wood building tradition in such landmarks as the Paul Revere House. Here the basic elements of the three-decker may be seen in their original form: a three-story wooden house built on the side-entry rowhouse plan.

The basic architectural characteristic of the three-decker is its wood frame construction. In most other American cities, the rowhouse developed in brick or stone. In Boston, however, the wood building technology brought by the settlers remained the norm among colonial craftsmen and was continued into the 19th century industrial period. Thus, when the post-Civil War flood of immigrants created a need for multiple-family housing, new house types developed within this wood building tradition. The first areas of three-decker development were South Boston and Roxbury, where the central city's fire laws prohibiting wood construction did not apply.

The three-decker followed the height standards set by the houses of the Colonial period; two floors and an attic. This three-story Colonial framing system, joining large wood beams without nails (mortise and tenon), was easily transferred to support the main frame of the new three-deckers. For the rest of the structure (interior walls, etc.) balloon framing techniques with nails and studs were used; these had been adopted by builders after the Civil War because of efficiency and

DEVELOPMENT OF THE THREE-DECKER



Three-deckers derived their name from the three-story rear porches that served the family's domestic needs.

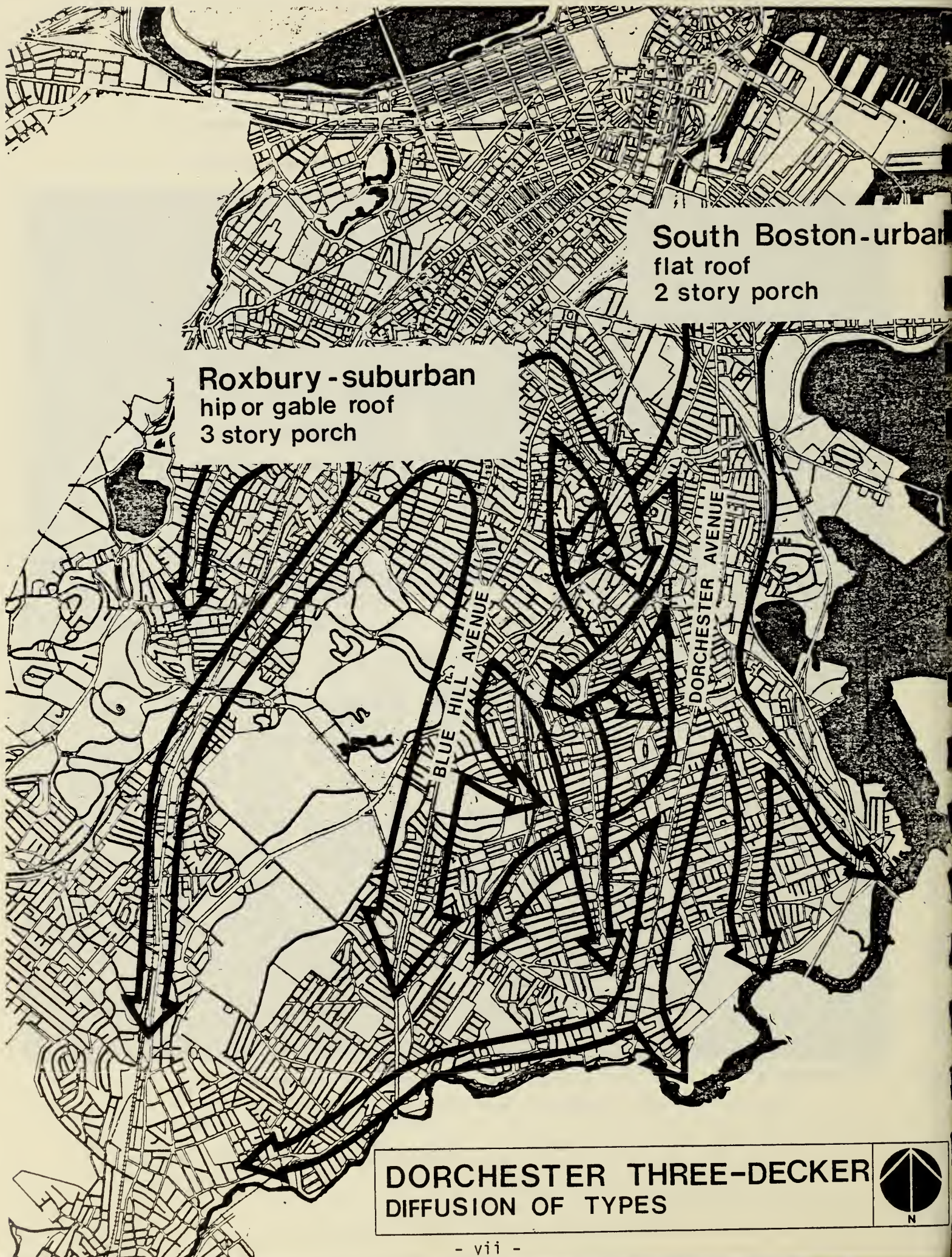
46-48 Robinson Street, Fields Corner
1890-1894

reduced costs of construction. Thus the antique construction methods of mortise and tenon joinery were continued by three-decker builders into the 20th century.

The narrow shape of the three-decker also is based on long tradition, the town house plan of Elizabethan England. Here the best room, the "parlour," faced the street with the door set off to one side and the kitchen at the back. In Boston this became the standard plan of the city rowhouse, with its side-entry doorway and kitchen ell. In the early 19th century the fashionable houses on Beacon Hill were designed with elegant bow front parlors, and this plan was adopted in the rowhouses of the new South End by the Civil War. Thus, when the first three-deckers were built, they took after the familiar side-entry rowhouse plan complete with parlor bay. Often two rowhouses would be built side-by-side as a double house, and this basic form was adopted by early three-decker builders in constructing six-family houses.

The functional origin of the three-decker lies in the principle of multiple-family housing and the solutions developed in Boston before the Civil War. There were two obvious antecedents at either end of the social spectrum, each built in the central city and each containing rental units for several families. One was the apartment house or "French Flat" that had been introduced to polite society with the Hotel Pelham in 1857. At the other extreme was the tenement house, with few domestic conveniences whatsoever. These were simply built and were chiefly occupied by the Irish immigrants in the 1850's.

The back porches are the true architectural innovation of the three-decker, for it is they that give it the distinctive character of a



South Boston-urban
flat roof
2 story porch

Roxbury - suburban
hip or gable roof
3 story porch

**DORCHESTER THREE-DECKER
DIFFUSION OF TYPES**



"porch house" (p. v). The rear decks developed when the rowhouse was divided into three-family units, one on each floor. Thus, the traditional kitchen ell had to be multiplied for each family floor, resulting in the formation of the "three-decker."

Since the three-decker developed at the edge of Boston, between the city and its new suburbs, there developed two types of three-deckers; those characteristic of the city with flat roofs in South Boston, and those characteristic of the suburbs with pitched roofs in Roxbury. Each area had its own set of builders, who carried the two types down through Dorchester along the main streetcar routes; those from South Boston along Dorchester Avenue, and those from Roxbury along Blue Hill Avenue. The two three-decker forms commingled over time, each borrowing from the other a roof or a porch, until in the end both looked the same (p. vii).

Streetcar Suburbs

The agent for diffusion of the three-decker in Dorchester was the streetcar. The noted urban historian Samuel Bass Warner has called Dorchester "the full flowering of the streetcar suburb," and in a very real sense the three-decker and the trolley were part and parcel of the same suburban landscape. Originally both were quite independent of one another, each developing separate functional identities during the Civil War era. By the turn of the 20th century their paths had crossed, and Dorchester became the essence of the streetcar suburb (p. ix and xi).



DORCHESTER
STREET CAR LINES
1918

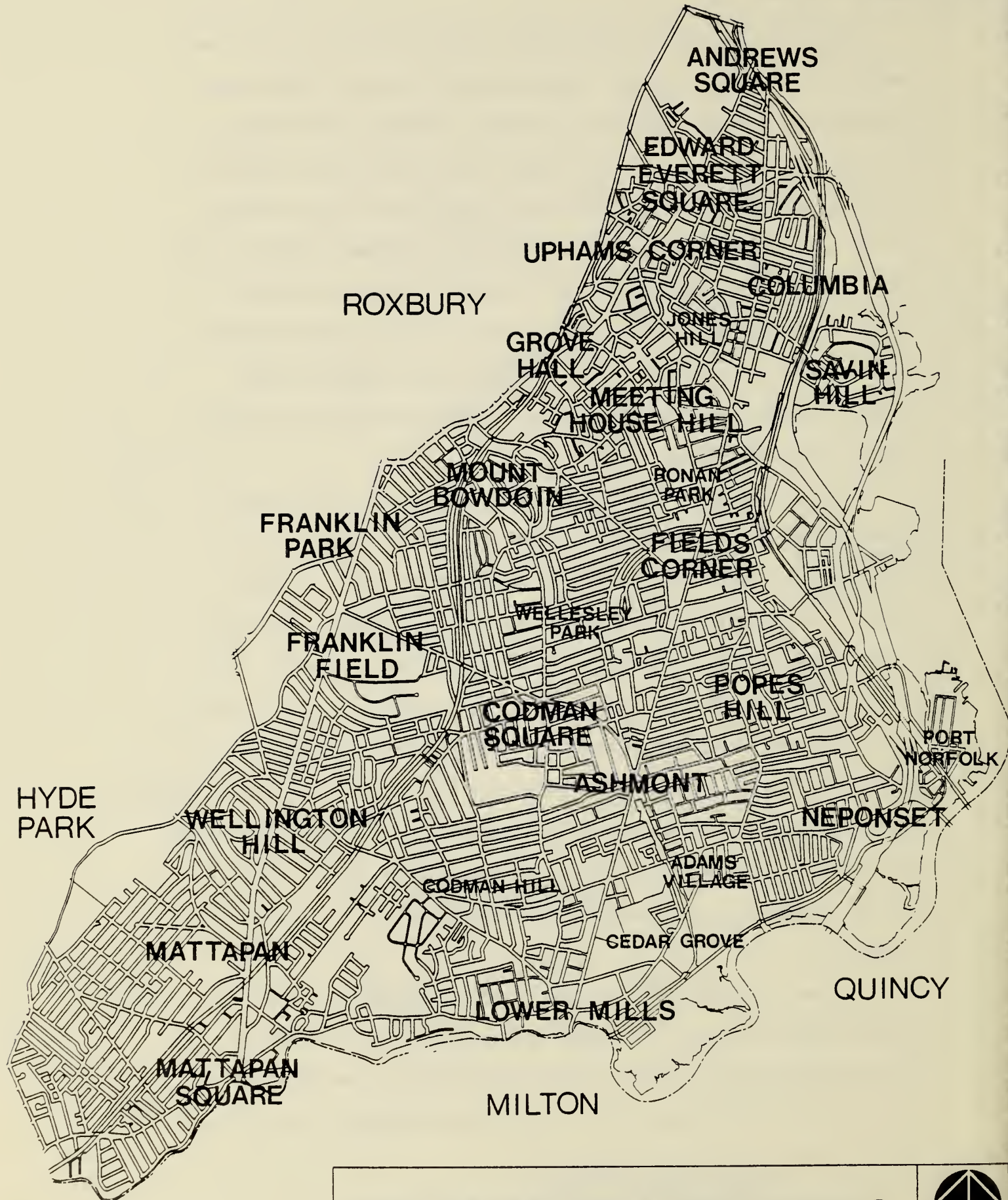


Boston was among the first cities in the world to have a complete metropolitan streetcar system. Following the old country stage lines that radiated from the center city, railway technology was adapted in the 1850's, and by the Civil War these horse railroad lines fanned out to Boston's limits, to Lynn on the north, Watertown on the west and Quincy on the south. In Dorchester the most important route ran from South Boston through Fields Corner to Lower Mills, along the full length of Dorchester Avenue, and through the first neighborhoods of three-decker development. Other horsecar routes operated along Boston, Hancock, and Bowdoin Streets, and from Roxbury to Codman Square along Washington Street.

The Depression of 1873 halted further expansion of the horse railroad system in Dorchester, and even caused the abandonment of several lines including the one on Freeport Street. With economic recovery in the 1880's the car lines were again extended. The new routes provided vital cross town service that linked Dorchester with Roxbury and the South End, including a loop from Fields Corner along Geneva Avenue to Upham's Corner, from Roxbury along Dudley Street through Upham's Corner to Dorchester Avenue at Savin Hill, and from Edward Everett Square to the South End along Massachusetts Avenue. By 1889 other lines opened along Blue Hill Avenue connecting the South End with Franklin Park, and Port Norfolk with Fields Corner along Neponset Avenue.

Horses, while handsome animals on the steeplechase, were inefficient as motive power for metropolitan transit systems, and much experimentation was conducted after the Civil War to devise a new power source for the horse cars. After several attempts with steam,

SOUTH BOSTON



DORCHESTER NEIGHBORHOODS



gas, and cable, electricity was perfected by the late 1880's using over-head trolley wires to power the cars. Again, Boston was among the first cities to adopt the new trolleys, which ran faster and cheaper than the horse cars, and thus opened up whole new suburban areas for development.

The meeting of the electric trolley and the three-decker occurred about 1890. At this point both had been perfected; their combined presence began to create a new landscape of the streetcar suburb in Dorchester. During the 1890's new trolley lines were built into the far reaches of practical service, from Fields Corner down Adams Street to Adams Village, from Codman Square down Washington and Norfolk Streets and from Lower Mills along River Street to Mattapan.

By the turn of the 20th century a new web of streetcar lines were cut across Dorchester creating a complete grid of trolley routes linking every major corner with each other, from Uphams Corner along Columbia Road to Franklin Park, from Franklin Park down Talbot Avenue to Peabody Square in Ashmont, from Mattapan to Roslindale along Cummins Highway, and the final thrust down Blue Hill Avenue to Mattapan.

These were the streetcar routes that directed the builder's minds and formed the three-decker neighborhoods of the early 20th century. During rush hours, trolleys ran every two minutes, and for 5¢ carried passengers from Dorchester to every corner of Boston. This universe, the trolley and the three-decker, lasted for a generation. Their era finally concluded with the automobile and the economic collapse of the Great Depression. Still Dorchester trolleys ran for another generation, as trackless trolley buses, until they too were dismantled in the 1960's.

Today the yellow MBTA buses run along the old car lines and maintain the fabric of the triple-decker neighborhoods, while the Red Line and the Southeast Expressway provide the modern transport links from Dorchester to the rest of Boston.

A Community of Builders

Since the building of three-deckers was a competitive business which did not require large amounts of capital, the builders themselves tended to be drawn from the ranks of local tradesmen. Evidence suggests the existence of a community of builders - an informal alliance of tradesmen and speculators who worked for and with each other, borrowing and inventing designs. It is they who were most responsible for the lively vernacular quality of the streetscapes of porches and cornices that are the delight of Dorchester today.

While some of these builders were Yankee carpenters, most of the three-deckers were constructed by newly emergent immigrant groups - Irish, Canadians, Jews and Italians, the very people the triple-deckers were meant to attract on the trolleys.

Usually there were three roles involved in the building of a three-decker; the landowner, the builder and the architect. Often they would, in fact, be three separate men. Quite frequently, however, the builder would also own the land, design the three-decker, and construct it. Often the roles would be switched so that the same group or individual would perform different functions in different neighborhoods. Not surprisingly, building three-deckers was mostly the work of men,

but often women, widows and spinsters, would buy the land and dictate the number and type of three-deckers constructed. And at least one three-decker was designed by a woman architect.

There were no blueprints or plans for the early three-deckers and builders followed the traditional measurements and methods of construction, repeating the basic rowhouse plan that had been handed down over generations. After the turn of the century, the three-decker designs became more complex, requiring architect's blueprints. But these were simply an outgrowth of the mental plans in the builder's head, often drawn in quick pencil sketches to satisfy the City Building Department. There were few professionally trained architects, and most men who gave themselves the title were really builders turned designers. Thus, the three-deckers were built by a repetition of successful methods and forms, following examples in the local neighborhoods, so that very distinctive three-decker types developed in various parts of Dorchester. Eventually, the stylistic individuality of local groups disappeared as builders from different parts of Dorchester crossed each other's paths and exchanged ideas and designs. At the same time, these local groups themselves were absorbed into a larger, more homogenous building community. Thus, by the end of the First World War three-deckers throughout Dorchester showed a great similarity of design.

N.B. Major groups of Dorchester builders and their respective areas of operation are discussed in greater detail in Appendix I.

Three-Decker - Triple-Decker - Three Family

Origin of the Term

The three-decker is a unique housing type characteristic of New England cities in the early 20th century. Generally defined, the three-decker is a free standing, wood frame structure on its own narrow lot, three stories high, with one family unit on each floor. Originally called "three-deckers," these houses were also known as three-families and in very recent years, have been called "triple-deckers," a term unknown to their original builders.

The antique term reveals the origin and function of the form. The three-decker is not simply a random term invented for the Dorchester triple-decker. Rather, the roots of the word can be traced to Elizabethan England and the great naval warships built to protect the British Isles. The most impressive man-of-war, the "Sovereign of the Seas," launched in 1637, was called a "three-decker" in reference to the three decks of guns that sat above the waterline. By the time of the American Revolution the impressive qualities of a "three-decker" were applied in popular speech to anything of great size or importance.

As a common figure of American speech, "three-decker" was quite naturally borrowed to describe the new three family, wooden houses evolving in New England cities during the late 19th century. The first true application of the term, like the first three-decker, cannot be precisely dated. The earliest reference is from Worcester in 1893, important because it indicates that this Massachusetts industrial city was an early three-decker center, and more significantly because it occurs just at the time when the first Dorchester three-deckers were being built in large numbers.

As an architectural term, the "three-decker" has a certain appropriate quality. Most obviously it describes the three-story rear porches that signify the three families living in the building. As in the "decks" of the old English sailing ships, the term also refers to the unique wooden quality that defines the three-decker as a New England housing type.

"Three-decker" was the common term until quite recently, used by both carpenter and scholar alike. In the last decade the old term finally gave way to the modern "triple-decker." Like everything, it loses something in translation but the term is the one that many people now understand to be proper for official reports.



DORCHESTER THREE-DECKERS
TOTAL DISTRIBUTION 1870-1930



PERIODS

The history of the Dorchester three-decker may be likened to a great wave of construction that swept down from the edge of Boston after the Civil War in 1865 and followed the streetcar lines from South Boston and Roxbury, and reached the Neponset River at Mattapan by the Great Depression of 1929. In Dorchester over 5,250 three-deckers were built between 1890 and 1930 by local developers and builders in a frenzy of activity that rivaled the boom towns of the West. The crest of the wave occurred between 1900 and the 1918, when some 3,500 were constructed. The final surge occurred in the late 1920's, lasting until the Depression.

The history of three-decker development can be divided into five distinctive periods, each characterized by a particular architectural style and geographical area of development:

	<u>Periods</u>	<u>Dates</u>	<u>No. Built</u>
I.	Formative	1875-1889	50
II.	Victorian	1890-1899	500
III.	Early Classic	1900-1910	1,600
IV.	Late Classic	1911-1918	1,950
V.	Functional	1919-1930	1,150

PROTOTYPE



A three-family mansard prototype with original three-story rear porches, the earliest surveyed example in Dorchester.

68 Willow Court, Andrew Square
About 1870
Mansard Style

PROTOTYPES

No one really invented the first three-decker, just as no one invented the first skyscraper or automobile. It developed from a number of prototypes in the Boston area and borrowed from housing experiences in other cities of New England. Sources indicate that the three-decker emerged in the building boom after the Civil War in the fringe between the city and its new suburbs, between working class and middle class neighborhoods and serving the families of both.

There are but a handful of three-decker prototypes in Dorchester. Most date from the early 1870's and are found along the Dorchester Avenue car line between South Boston and Neponset on the edge of the industrial district. These prototypes reflect the dominant architectural styles of the post-Civil War period; the Bracketed Italianate with its jigsaw scroll work, and the French Mansard with its distinctive roof.

Bracketed Prototype: the oldest documented prototypes follow the South Boston plan, i.e., the flat roof urban row or tenement. Three stories high, they have Bracketed roof and entry details but lack the three story rear porches that would make them true "three-deckers." Most notable of the surviving Bracketed examples are the elaborate double house at 20 Mt. Vernon Street, and the simple three family tenement at 8 Duncan Street.

Mansard Prototype: an equally fashionable style after the Civil War was the French Mansard with its distinctive roof that allowed a full story in the attic. Otherwise plain buildings with three stories including this

Mansard fall into this category: examples include the pair at 8-10 Port Norfolk Street, and the well-preserved three family house at 68 Willow Court off Massachusetts Avenue (p. 3). This last example, with original rear porch decks, constructed by 1874 is the oldest surveyed three-decker prototype in Dorchester.



DORCHESTER THREE-DECKERS
FORMATIVE PERIOD 1875-1889
STREETCAR ROUTES 1889



I. FORMATIVE PERIOD 1875-1889

During the Formative Period, the three-decker emerged as a distinctive architectural form. About fifty structures were built; some continued the stylistic characteristics of the Mansard and Bracketed prototypes, others picked up the newest Queen Anne Revival style. Common to all are three stories and full height rear porches. The increase in amount of three-decker construction parallels general building activity in the newly annexed suburb; this activity was spurred during the 1880's after the economy was recovering from the Depression of 1873.

Mansard Type: the first truly authentic three-deckers, those with full three story rear decks, appear in the Mansard style along the streetcar routes through Dorchester (p. 7). These are essentially three-family rowhouses with the third floor covered with the slate shingles of a Mansard roof. The best preserved of these early three-deckers is the group opposite Edison Green at 922-928 Dorchester Avenue built between 1875-1882. The rear view on Buttonwood Street is the first three-decker landscape in Dorchester.

Queen Anne Style: with an expanding economy and increased construction in the 1880's, three-decker builders adopted a newly popular stylistic fashion, the Queen Anne Revival. For the most up-to-date and expensive models, builders applied elaborate Queen Anne decorative details such as patterned shingles and iron crested towers on the

FORMATIVE PERIOD



A six-family double house of the Formative Period with original shingled bays and arched entry in the Queen Anne Style.

796-798 Dorchester Avenue, Columbia
1886-1889
Queen Anne Style

FORMATIVE PERIOD



An early detached three-decker with Bracketed Cornice and Queen Anne entry typical of the South Boston type.

49 Minor Street, Neponset

1886-1889

Bracketed Queen Anne Style

traditional six-family, double house plan. Most were built along the horse car lines between Uphams and Fields Corner. Well-preserved examples survive at 106-108 Stoughton Street, 51-53 Savin Hill Avenue, 796-798 Dorchester Avenue at Locust (p. 9), 32-34 Arcadia Street near Fields Corner, 300-310 Washington Street near Mt. Bowdoin, and 15 Wendover Street behind Uphams Corner.

It was not until after 1885 that the three-decker emerged as a distinct building form, and importantly, as a standardized form housing three families in one detached structure. Queen Anne, then the most up-to-date style, was popular for these new structures. Numerous examples were built on the side streets off the new trolley lines. The best remaining examples include 70 Draper Street, the first three-decker on Mt. Ida with its elaborate shingling and porch detail, 158 Neponset Avenue with its towered bay, and 49 Minot Street, the earliest three-decker in the Neponset area (p. 10).

Bracketed Tenements: less expensive three-deckers of the 1880's continued the older Bracketed flat roof style of South Boston. They were usually built in pairs near industrial areas or commercial districts along the axis of the Dorchester Avenue car line. Interesting early groups include those on 122-126 and 174 Boston Street and 749-771 Dorchester Avenue at Howell Street, 148-152 Pleasant Street, the large block at 29-35 Erie Street opposite Mt. Bowdoin Station, and the surviving example at 110 Hamilton Street below Meeting House Hill.



DORCHESTER THREE-DECKERS
VICTORIAN PERIOD 1890-1899
STREETCAR ROUTES 1899



II. VICTORIAN PERIOD 1890-1899

The first real surge of three-decker construction in Dorchester occurred in conjunction with the electrification of the horse car transit lines in 1890. Previously only isolated pairs of three-deckers had been built, but with better transportation out of the central city to Dorchester, entire streets of three-deckers were developed, with over 600 built during the 1890's. Stylistically the Queen Anne Revival continued to serve as the architectural benchmark of Victorian period three-deckers; often builders, trying to distinguish their work from neighbors', added special creative details.

By the mid 1890's, more expensive three-deckers adopted the Colonial Revival style, already fashionable for many other modes of home building. In addition, the Victorian period witnessed the development of the other major three-decker forms: the gable or hip roof types, in the western portion of Dorchester; and store block construction with three-decker characteristics.

Pairs and Double Houses

In the Victorian period, development of three-decker features began with individual six-family double houses. The common style was Queen Anne Revival, the dominant style of the time, often designed with appealing combinations of shingles and textured patterns on the bays. Notable examples of Queen Anne double units from 1890-1894 include: 819-821 Dorchester Avenue near Harvest Street; 1045-1049, 1077-1079, and 1081-1083 Dorchester Avenue (p. 15); 4-6 Mayhew Street at Boston Street; 62-64 Fuller Street near Peabody Square; and 235-237 Columbia Road near Devon Street.

VICTORIAN PERIOD



A pair of three-deckers showing typical Queen Anne Style features of bracketed cornices, parapet roofs and shingled skirts on the bays.

1077-1083 Dorchester Avenue, Savin Hill
1892; J.A. Daunt, architect
Queen Anne Style

VICTORIAN PERIOD



An early series of three-deckers with flat roofs and narrow lots typical of South Boston.

21-41 Howell Street, Andrew Square
1890-1894
Queen Anne Style

The more avant-garde builders of this period reached into a new style, the Colonial Revival, for their most costly three-deckers. As usual the six-family double house was the showcase for this new design, which during the Victorian period was restricted mostly to isolated buildings. A number of well-preserved early Colonial Revival three-deckers from this period survive on the former streetcar routes between Uphams and Fields Corner. Included among these are: 38-40 Moseley Street off Crescent Street; 90-92 Stoughton Street; 342-344 Bowdoin Street at Meeting House Hill; 363 Quincy Street overlooking Columbia Road; and the two pairs at 55-57 and 59-61 Bailey Street near Peabody Square.

Streetscapes

As the speculative wave of three-decker construction grew during the Victorian period, entire streetscapes of detached three-deckers were developed, establishing an important facet of the architectural character of Dorchester as a streetcar suburb.

The first full streets of Victorian period three-deckers were developed from 1890 to 1894 on open lots and older estates south of Andrew Square, in the triangle formed by Dorchester Avenue, Boston Street, and Columbia Road. Packed tightly on narrow lots (one lot for each building), these were modest Queen Anne Revival style structures similar despite being developed by a variety of individual builders. The rhythms of the bays and cornices flowing down the narrow streets created a compelling architectural effect. The best preserved include Washburn, Howell and Bellflower Streets (p. 16), site of a 1964 fire

that destroyed many of this early group. Other fine streetscapes of this period can be seen at 252-276 East Cottage Street at Pond Street; along 4-12 Buttonwood Street as it dips into Crescent Street, and 3-23 Hamlet Street behind Uphams Corner.

A mix of modest three-deckers with Queen Anne Revival and Colonial Revival details developed in the mid 1890's on the side streets near Fields Corner. Along Leedsville, East and Hecla Streets at the base of Meeting House Hill, three-deckers first gained a view of Boston Harbor. Other streets with a pleasant mixture of early three-deckers include: Robinson, Westville and Draper Streets on the south slope of Mount Ida; Maryland Street off Savin Hill Avenue; Granger and Duncan Streets near Freeport; Armandine Street below Codman Square; and Bearse Avenue in Lower Mills. For builders willing to experiment with new architectural styles, the Colonial Revival had become the most popular by the mid-1890's. Two groups on Meeting House Hill show the early use of Colonial Revival features: at 30-54 Clarkson Street, in the suburban hip roof style (see following section); and at 28-40 Church Street, facing the First Parish Meeting House, in a more typical flat roof style.

Roxbury Roof Types

The western half of Dorchester was influenced by the suburban architecture of its nearest neighbor, Roxbury, rather than the urban forms of South Boston. Along the principal axis of development, the Washington Street car line from Grove Hall to Codman Square, three-deckers displayed the gable and hip roof style that had been developed in the 1880's by Roxbury builders on Mission Hill. Elaborate Queen

VICTORIAN PERIOD



An early pair of Queen Anne three-deckers with gabled roofs typical of Roxbury builders.

48-50 Bailey Street, Ashmont
1894; F. H. Julien, architect
Queen Anne Style

Anne Revival gables and double bays appeared on Washington Street by the 1890's; well preserved examples include those on 7-9 Fenelon Street, 73-93 Bowdoin Avenue, and 15-25 Gaylord Street.

By the late 1890's, the Roxbury gable roof had been carried far south of Codman Square. Modest examples of the style are found in the pair at 48-50 Bailey Street (p. 19) near Peabody Square and at 275-279 Gallivan Boulevard at Dorchester Avenue. A few isolated examples even appear in the heart of old Dorchester: most notable are 86 Romsey Street, in handsome Colonial Revival detail with full Palladian window in the gable, 34 Belfort Street with panelled bays and a hip roof, and 80 Richfield Street.

Storeblocks

The development of the three-decker store block also began in the 1890's along this Washington Street axis. In the Queen Anne Revival style with towered bays and inset panels with both roof forms, these serve as important landmarks as well as commercial centers for their neighborhoods. Original examples include those at 411 Geneva Avenue at Westville Street; 52-56 Norfolk Street at Oakwood Street; the pair at 754-760 and 764-766 Washington Street at Ashmont Street; and 578 River Street at Tesla Street in Mattapan.



DORCHESTER THREE-DECKERS
EARLY CLASSIC PERIOD 1900-1910
STREETCAR ROUTES 1910



III. EARLY CLASSIC PERIOD 1900-1910

By the turn of the century, the basic form of the three-decker had been perfected and standardized, in time for the full force of speculative construction throughout Dorchester. The term Early Classic is applied to this period because it was at this time that the three-decker began to reach the peak of its most popular, familiar, and clearly identifiable form. Over 1,500 three-deckers were built in Dorchester between 1900 and 1910 as the opening of electric trolley lines further increased opportunity for the average family to leave Boston proper. Builders followed the trolley tracks to the far corners of Dorchester: south along Blue Hill Avenue to Mattapan, and cross-town along Talbot Avenue from Ashmont to Franklin Park. Open hills with views of the harbor and distant heights also became sites for three-decker development, as happened at Jones Hill, Mount Ida, Pope's Hill, Mount Bowdoin and Walk Hill.

The application of the Colonial Revival style, successor in popularity to the Queen Anne Revival, had given the three-decker a sense of classic proportion and balance, neutralizing the narrow massing of its side-entry row house plan. During the Early Classic period, additional embellishments appeared; most obvious was the multi-storied porch with its handsome Doric columns and elaborate turned railings creating a distinctive architecture of outlined rooms in the front yard. Rounded corner bays emerged first for costlier structures and then were more generally adopted. The roof cornice also was transformed into an impressive architectural device, with massive blocked dentils that easily

EARLY CLASSIC PERIOD



An Early Classic streetscape of three-deckers with doric porticos, showing the development of the entry from a simple hood to a one-story portico to the full two-story porch.

6-14 Elder Street, Everett Square
1904; Boyd and Berry, architects
Colonial Revival Style

caught light. These embellishments were intended to make the three-decker distinctive, but soon became standardized themselves to become the familiar features of the Dorchester three-decker.

Early porches

The first Colonial Revival style three-deckers had been little more than Queen Anne Revival designs distinguished by applied classical details in the columned portico around the doorway. Simple rows of these were built during the early 1900's in already-established three-decker neighborhoods, including those on Crescent Avenue between Moseley and Carson Streets, on Harbor View Street opposite Grant Street, and on Elder Street below Columbia Road (p. 23).

A principal change in the Early Classic period that displays the full flowering of the Dorchester three-decker is the transformation of the entry portico into the two-story front porch. This new feature, developed in the early 1900's, gave families on the upper floors their own private balcony on the street, and gave the form itself an architectural distinction that befitted its status as a dominant house form in the streetcar suburb. The earliest documented group of two-story porches was built from 1894 to 1904 along the Dorchester Avenue axis, at 28-32 and 19-29 Sudan Street, at 41-47 Pearl Steeet, and at 91-97 Dakota Street off Geneva Avenue.

Streetscapes

Not until the standardization of the two-story porch form was the visual impact of the new style apparent. After 1904, builders began to create entire streetscapes of columned three-deckers. Of the Early

EARLY CLASSIC PERIOD



A streetscape of Early Classic Period three-deckers with two-story porches displaying coupled columns and bowed railings.

6-30 Taft Street, Columbia
1906-1908; William Duff and Timothy J. Lyons, architects
Colonial Revival Style

Classic period streetscapes, by far the finest is the group on Taft Street off Dorchester Avenue (p. 25). Here the porches, supported on massive granite piers at ground level with handsome coupled columns above, make an architectural effect yet more compelling as a result of the subtle curve of Taft Street into Pleasant Street.

Other important groups of Early Classic period porched three-deckers are found off Dorchester Avenue on Hallam Street with handsome arched stone foundations, 273-297 Centre Street and at 19-25 Thornley Street. Impressive streetscapes can be seen around the base of Mount Ida at 73-99 Adams Street (between Fox and Linden Streets), at 97-109 Draper Street, and at 229-251 Park Street near Fields Corner. More modest are streetscapes on Norton Street below Bowdoin Street, 184-210 Westville Street off Geneva Avenue, Santuit Street and at 15-31 Roseland Street near Peabody Square, 47-55 Aspinwall Road and 9-29 Dunlap Road near Codman Square, and Leslie Street off Centre Street.

Another positive attribute of the three-decker porch was its advantage in gaining an ocean view of Boston Harbor from the top deck. By 1910, a number had been built on the glacial hills overlooking Dorchester Bay. Most notable are those on Jones Hill at 17-25 Peverell Street and 124-130 Cushing Avenue, and those on the slope of Pope's Hill at 88-112 King Street.

Rounded Bay

Expensive three-deckers of the Early Classic period found their mark of architectural distinction in the rounded corner bay, often with curved glass and delicate cornice work. The effect was most appealing

EARLY CLASSIC PERIOD



A fine Colonial Revival three-decker with a two-story porch that shows the rounded corner bay, a feature which was used frequently after 1905.

50 Rosemont Street, Pope's Hill
1906; Thomas H. Hanlon, architect
Colonial Revival Style

and lent grace to the streetscape. The first examples of this form were built from 1900 to 1904, and include the well-preserved pair at 1019-1021 Dorchester Avenue, with Palladian window above the doorways; the outstanding group at 19-23 Adams Street on Meeting House Hill and the handsome set at 760-774 Columbia Road at Greenhalge Street.

After 1905, the rounded bay became a more generalized feature of Colonial Revival three-deckers throughout Dorchester. Designs of great imagination include those at 15 Arcadia Street near Fields Corner, 124 Melville Avenue at Dorchester Avenue, 50 Rosemount Street (p. 27) on Pope's Hill, and 24 Pierce Street at Ashmont Street. Striking groups are found at 201-209 East Cottage Street opposite Richardson Park, at 53-61 Hamilton Street at Bellevue Street, at 16-28 Kerwin Street at Talbot Avenue, and the surviving row at 1410-1430 Blue Hill Avenue below Norfolk Street.

Corner Stores

The rounded bay was also an effective solution for the corner store blocks built after the turn of the century. Some of this genre show remarkable quality with original Colonial Revival detail still intact; these include the superb example at 257-261 Dorchester Avenue at Roseclair Street, the handsome row at 696-702 Columbia Road at Everett Square, and the landmark block of 340 Washington Street at the intersection of Bowdoin Street.

Dorchester Cornice

The final innovation of the Early Classic Period was a cornice type creating a distinctive character for the Dorchester three-decker. The

EARLY CLASSIC PERIOD



A group of Early Classic Period three-deckers with the distinctive Dorchester cornice; the original shutters are an unusual surviving feature.

347-357 Bowdoin Street, Meeting House Hill
1904; William H. Smith, architect
Colonial Revival Style

Dorchester cornice was essentially a braced parapet with decorative pendant drops which framed the top of the street facade. This embellishment was derived from two sources: the double-bay Roxbury gabled three-decker of the 1890's; and the Queen Anne Revival bracing attached to the flat-roofed Dorchester form. The architectural effect of the Dorchester cornice was dramatic, squeezing the geometry of the double bays within the narrow facade, and with the columned porches, the form became all the more complex.

This new cornice form first appeared, logically enough, in the overlapping zone between Roxbury and Dorchester, whose styles were the source for the hybrid form. The earliest examples were built from 1896 to 1904 in the area between Mount Bowdoin and Meeting House Hill; included are the groups at 49-61 Hancock Street near Uphams Corner, 9-17 Bullard Street near Geneva Avenue on Mount Bowdoin, the fine double plan types at 755-797 Columbia Road near ^{Edward} Everett Square, and the row at 15-31 Greenlock Street off Blue Hill Avenue in Mattapan.

Between 1905 and 1910 the Dorchester cornice became a common feature of expensive three-deckers throughout the area. Impressive rows of these Early Classic period types include those at 147-159 Boston Street (near the office of the Dorchester Historical Society), 15-21 Dix Street near Fields Corner, and 362-382 & 415-425 Geneva Avenue and 3-31 Topliff Street near Mount Bowdoin. By far the finest examples of the Dorchester cornice are found on the three-deckers of Meeting House Hill facing Eaton Square at 10-22 Church Street and 339-361 Bowdoin Street (p. 29); these buildings are complete with elaborate Colonial Revival porches, colored shingles and original shutters around the windows. A similar row is seen nearby on Jones Hill at 9-23 DeWolf Street.

EARLY CLASSIC PERIOD



The suburban roof types of western Dorchester changed from the gable to the hip roof form, often with dormers. .

503-527 Geneva Avenue, Fields Corner
1903; Frederick J. Rockwell, architect
Colonial Revival Style

Suburban Roof Types

The three-deckers of western Dorchester continued to be characterized by the distinctive suburban roof types of the Roxbury builders. Yet the gable roof now became less common and was replaced by the low-hip roof with attic dormers. Of the gable roof three-deckers, from the early 1900's, the more important examples include those at 17-25 Harvard Street near Mount Bowdoin, on Inwood Street off Bowdoin, 6-18 Vesta Street off Talbot Avenue, 1 Stockton Street at Washington, and the handsome pair at 41-45 Evelyn Street off Blue Hill Avenue.

After 1900 hip roofs became the common architectural feature of three-deckers in western Dorchester. Notable groups were built near the crosstown trolley lines, such as 503-527 Geneva Avenue (p. 31) at Fields Corner, at 306-314 Talbot Avenue near Codman Square, at 5-25 Nightingale Street near Harvard Street, 27-29 Walton Street off Ashmont Street, 577-589 Norfolk Street and those on Wilmore Street off Blue Hill Avenue.

The least common roof type in Dorchester was the Colonial Gambrel, a variant of the barn roof giving a rural accent to the third story. While common to three-deckers in the Connecticut Valley, the gambrel was rare in Dorchester: the few examples include 83-89 Waldeck Street near Fields Corner and 849-853 Cummins Highway in Mattapan.



DORCHESTER THREE-DECKERS
LATE CLASSIC PERIOD 1911-1918
STREETCAR ROUTES 1918



IV. LATE CLASSIC PERIOD 1911-1918

The crest of the three-decker wave across Dorchester was reached in the years before the First World War when nearly two thousand were built and entire neighborhoods created. Along with the further spread of the three-decker streetscape, this pre-war period is marked by increased building costs and consequent adoption of new stylistic features derived from the Prairie and Bungalow styles, which were simpler and hence cheaper to produce. Nevertheless, many features and forms from previous periods continued to be used--particularly the rounded window bay, and the Roxbury-influenced roof and porch variants of western Dorchester.

Streetscapes

Streetscapes of Late Classic three-deckers demonstrate the full intensity of the speculative development of the pre-war period. Here the architectual power of the columned porches is most dramatic, repeating the metaphor of outlined cubes down the streets of Dorchester. Each neighborhood has its own sequence. Among the finest of the Late Classic period is St. Marks Road (p. 35) off Dorchester Avenue in Ashmont where the curve of the street animates the geometry of the columns. Other three-decker streetscapes occur on Sudan Street off Dorchester Avenue, Annapolis Street behind Pleasant, on Groom Street behind Uphams Corner, on Cameron Street at Kane Square, on Alpha Street near Park and Kenberma Street off Washington. The truly spectacular repetition of forms is seen on Ronan Park along Juliette

LATE CLASSIC PERIOD



A superb steetscape of the Late Classic Period with two-story fluted posts and decorative cornice work.

15-27 St. Marks Road, Ashmont
1916; James Beckwith, architect
Colonial Revival Style

LATE CLASSIC PERIOD



Late Classic three-deckers dot Jones Hill and frame a view of the First Parish Church steeple in the distance.

9-19 Rowell Street, Jones Hill
1912; William E. Wright, architect
Colonial Revival Style

LATE CLASSIC PERIOD



A pure example of the Prairie-Bungalow style three-decker with a linear cornice and square porch posts and a roof parapet.
472-474 Talbot Avenue, Ashmont
1916; J. Frederick Krokyn, architect
Prairie-Bungalow Style

and Percival Streets and on Ridgewood Street off Geneva Avenue and Templeton Street near Peabody Square.

Like their predecessors, the Late Classic three-deckers continued to conquer Dorchester's many hills which provided a view of Boston Harbor. By the First World War they had mounted the crests of the glacial drumlins that surround Dorchester Bay, up Jones Hill on 60-76 Downer Avenue, Rowell Street (p. 36), and 66-78 Sawyer Avenue up Mt. Ida to Ronan Park on 4-14 Marie Street and 47-69 Mt. Ida Road, around the base of Savin Hill at Malibu Beach on Bayside Street, and up Popes Hill at 29-49 Rosemont and 70-92 Train and 12-22 North Monroe Streets.

Despite the visual impact of the continuous streetscape, it is in the small groupings that the true quality of the Late Classic three-decker is best seen. There is a basic sensitivity to proportion, color and texture that reveals the maturity of the three-decker as an architectural form. Numerous fine examples are found throughout Dorchester, the most notable being, 640-656 Adams Street in Adams Village, 77-95 Draper Street on Mount Ida, 18-22 Everett Street off Mill Street. 38-58 and 57-99 Neponset Avenue near Fields Corner - 228-240 Park Street at Fields Corner, 102-110 Greenbriar Street above Codman Square, 428-434 Washington Street beside Crown Walk, 153-157 River Street in Lower Mills, and 17-20 Rector Road in Mattapan.

Prairie-Bungalow Style: Three-deckers of the Late Classic Period developed their distinctive architectural form by combining the basic proportions of the Colonial Revival with elements borrowed from the Prairie-Bungalow Style. Originating in the Midwest and Western states,

LATE CLASSIC PERIOD



A fine example of the Late Classic Period with bowed bays, doric columns and palladian windows.

1621 Dorchester Avenue, Fields Corner
1915; F.P. Fallabella, architect
Colonial Revival Style

this style was characterized by crisp geometric outlines with functional detail and earthy textures produced by the use of rustic materials-- shingles, stucco, rough stone, and thick, overhanging wood rafters.

The adoption of these features for the Dorchester three-decker is most noticable on the porches, where the rounded forms, tapered Doric columns, and delicately turned balustrades of the Colonial Revival were replaced with the angular lines, stout, fluted Bungalow posts, and solid, stick-like railings of the Prairie-Bungalow style. Painted clapboards were replaced by stained wood shingles, and clear panes were substituted for lead glass -- all combining to produce a handsome, if mass produced, design.

Pure expression of Prairie School and Bungalow design is nevertheless relatively rare in Dorchester three-deckers, reflecting the basic conservatism of local builders in their hesitancy to adopt fully a unfamiliar style. The earliest example is found in Mattapan at 734-736 Cummins Highway, designed in 1910 by Charles Greco, the noted Cambridge architect. It displays an arched stucco doorway, brown shingle siding, enclosed sun porch and raftered roof that predated the Functional style three-deckers of the 1920's. Other Prairie-Bungalow examples from the Pre-War period include 472-474 Talbot Avenue (p. 37) with sharp octagonal bays and a linear parapet, the group at 7-27 Everton Street behind Geneva Avenue with stucco work and raftered cornice, and the striking row at 493-501 Talbot Avenue with bowed bays and deep hip roof.

LATE CLASSIC PERIOD



An excellent Late Classic three-story porch in Mattapan with elaborate consoled railings and handsome stone piers.

446 Norfolk Street, Mattapan
1911; Charles Russell, architect
Colonial Revival Style

Rounded Bays

The height of architectural distinction for Dorchester three-deckers was still the rounded corner bay, and the Late Classic period produced some of the finest examples to be found in Boston. Certainly the prize group are those on Pleasant Street between East Cottage and Stoughton designed by A.R. Gilliland, attractively set back amid green lawns and trees with beautiful stained glass and elaborate porch-work. Well preserved groups are found at 116-124 Adams Street near Meeting House Hill, 90-92 Savin Hill Avenue, 1222-1224 Blue Hill Avenue, and the fine example at 1621 Dorchester Avenue (p. 39).

The rounded bay was also used on more modest three-deckers creating wonderful streetscapes of curving forms, including those by Gilliland on Chase Street at East Cottage and on Sumner Square behind Stoughton, and 24-28 Mora and 13-19 Fairmont Streets on Codman Hill.

Porches

The Late Classic period saw the imagination of local builders develop freely with creative decorative effects in highly inventive porch details which, though they ultimately derived from the Colonial Revival, can nevertheless be viewed as true folk art. Most of the energy was spent on the railing design of the second story porch. One of the more remarkable examples of the porch builder's fancy is seen at 116-120 Stoughton Street designed by Patrick O'Hearn. The finest three-decker porches of the period had graceful elliptical railings bowed out on scrolled console brackets above the entry. Fine examples can be seen throughout Dorchester including those on the row at 180-196 Boston Street near Everett Square, on the handsome pairs at

LATE CLASSIC PERIOD



A sweeping curve of Late Classic three-deckers with two- and three-story porches, typical of western Dorchester.

236-280 Geneva Avenue, Mount Bowdoin
1911-1913; Robert Hamilton, architect
Colonial Revival Style

1648-1650 Dorchester Avenue, 1745-1747 Dorchester Avenue, 56-60
Everton Street off Geneva and on the three-story examples at
446-452 Norfolk Street (p. 41), Mattapan and the landmark 134-136
Hancock Street near Kane Square at the foot of Jones Hill.

Western Dorchester

The western half of Dorchester continued to develop distinctive architectural forms influenced by nearby Roxbury. While the hip and gable roof types were discarded due to inflationary pre-war costs, three-deckers along Blue Hill Avenue retained their characteristic three-story porches. At the same time, speculative building activity resulted in the creation of whole three-decker neighborhoods in Mattapan before the First World War.

The largest concentration of three-deckers was formed around the intersection of Morton Street with the Blue Hill Avenue car line. The streetscapes show the effects of mass production and loss of imagination with modest ornamental details and brown shingle siding. The more cohesive groups today include those on Hansborough, Johnson, Havelock and Baird Streets into Morton Street between Harvard and Blue Hill Avenue. Other include those on Deering Road below Wellington Hill and Crowell Street off Norfolk. Often both two and three story porch types would be built on the same street creating an interesting variety, as on Woolson and Sutton Streets and the graceful curve of three-deckers around 236-280 Geneva Avenue (p. 43) below Mt. Bowdoin and 26-48 Monadnock Street behind Uphams Corner.



DORCHESTER THREE-DECKERS
FUNCTIONAL PERIOD 1919-1930
TRANSIT ROUTES 1930



V. FUNCTIONAL PERIOD 1919-1933

Although the crest of the speculative building wave had already peaked by the post-war period, energetic construction of three-deckers continued into the 1920's, when over 1,000 were built in Dorchester. Even so, the three-decker as a form for new housing finally died out by the end of this period, a result of major political and economic forces.

Early political opposition to the three-decker had come from housing reformers and suburbanites, who saw two major liabilities: multi-family housing was perceived as a threat to single-family districts, and streets lined with wooden buildings were considered a major fire hazard. This last fear was realized in two major conflagrations, Chelsea in 1908 and Salem in 1914, and as a result the towns surrounding Boston banned the three-decker. By 1924, political forces in Boston decrying the three-decker as a potential menace engineered a 1927 City Council ban on their construction in Boston.

The post-war boom added economic pressure against the three-decker. In the 1920's, many families could now afford automobiles; this ease of transportation moved development interests to work away from the older streetcar suburb to the outer suburban fringe reached by new motor highways. At the same time, the severe inflation of the 1920's, increasing construction costs, forced builders to remove any embellishment from three-decker designs; thus, the spare form lost much attractiveness to traditional buyers.

The final blow to the three-decker was the collapse of the national economy begun by the stock market crash of 1929. This disaster

virtually closed the housing market, left local builders bankrupt and countless families jobless. Thus, mutually reinforcing political and economic pressures brought an end to the era of the three-decker; the last known examples in Dorchester were built in 1930 (see p. 48).

Functional Style

Postwar inflation brought about fundamental changes in the architectural character of the Dorchester three-decker. In the elimination of all excessive detail, the basic plan was reduced to the essential form, a Functional style of architecture drawing upon the natural aesthetic of the Prairie and Bungalow styles of the Midwest. The three-decker thus became a purely geometric form: the porch was transformed from an open verandah to an enclosed sun room, and the decorative railing was replaced by shingled skirts; heavy cornice work was replaced by simple lapped boards around the roof edge; and, most importantly, the parlor bays were eliminated, leaving the facade as a simple flat surface with bands of windows.

In contrast to the simplified exterior, the interior plan was expanded from a long file of rooms to a broad ensemble of spaces, with all the modern conveniences of the 1920's. The tall, narrow facade of the classic triple-decker now became a well-balanced composition, with the porch and entrance squarely in the center instead of on one side (the early rowhouse form). Least changed were the rear porches that still looked like the three-deckers of the Victorian period.

The Late Classic style still lingered for a time after the First World War, and a number of notable examples were built in the early 1920's. The best known in Boston are those at 16-24 Hubbardston Road

FUNCTIONAL PERIOD



The last three-deckers built in Dorchester had simple designs with minimal details, especially on their porches.

139 Sydney Street
1928; Schein & Levine, architects
Prairie-Bungalow Style

FUNCTIONAL PERIOD



Functional three-deckers achieved a pure geometry with symmetrical porches and bays.

59 Wilcock Street, Mattapan
1924; Samuel S. Levy, architect
Prairie-Bungalow Style

at Savin Hill: these are true landmarks, suspended above the Southeast Expressway on a monumental concrete retaining wall. Other notable groups are found on Thelma Road off Neponset Avenue, 64-82 Sudan Street near Sydney, and 73-83 Richmond Street in Lower Mills.

Some of the architectural character of the Late Classic three-deckers continued into the Functional Period. The results were triple-deckers of handsome proportions and spare geometry of porches outlined against plain shingled walls. Successful compositions include those on Manley Street off Victory Road, 32-34 Bellvue near Quincy Street, 668-674 Adams Street above Adams Village, 37-49 Milwood Street near Cedar Grove Cemetery, 90 Capen Street at Selden Street, 24 Ufford Street near Evans Street, 1-5 Jones Street at Ballou Street, 59 Willcock Street (p. 49) at the corner of Morton Street, and 854 Cummins Highway near Mattapan Square.

Because of the lingering affection for the designs of the Classic period, few three-deckers were actually built in the prevailing Bungalow or Prairie styles. The handful of examples include those on 1749-1757 Dorchester Avenue below Fields Corner, 7-11 Wheatland Street off Washington Street, and the hip-roofed group at 59-67 Evans Street off Capen Street.

Three-story porches

The distinction between Roxbury and Dorchester building types disappeared after the First World War, and the three-story porch became the dominant architectural type throughout Dorchester. In small groups, the stark effect and simple geometry of the Functional Period can be quite attractive, especially when set in suburban surroundings.

FUNCTIONAL PERIOD



This handsome trio of Functional Period three-deckers with three-story porches overlooks Mt. Bowdoin Green.

20-32 Bowdoin Avenue, Mt. Bowdoin
1927; Eisenberg and Feer, architects
Prairie-Bungalow Style

Notable examples include: 78-106 Rosseter Street and 20-32 Bowdoin Avenue (p. 51), both on Mount Bowdoin; 68-88 Olney Street off Geneva Avenue, 57-67 Saxton Street near Savin Hill Avenue; 6-12 Ashland Street off Mill Street; 83-95 Pierce Street in Neponset and the attractive set of Hildreth Street behind Norfolk Street.

Streetscapes

Streetscapes of the Functional period still show the phenomenal energy of building activity that endured through the 1920's. The hard-edged forms define the space, and broad ribbons of porches are still compelling on a large scale. The best series are found on Whitten Street off Adams Street, 833-947 Morton Street (p. 53) at Selden Street, Wentworth Street opposite the Dorchester High playground, Donald Street off Blue Hill Avenue, Greendale Road off Morton Street, and the handsome array on Hosmer Street off Blue Hill Avenue.

One last surge of three-deckers up the hills of Dorchester took place after the First World War. The attractive siting gives these Functional style structures a value far beyond their architectural modesty. The best harbor views can be enjoyed from 106-114 Sawyer Avenue on Jones Hill, from 87-95 Mount Ida Street beside Ronan Park, from South Monroe Terrace on Pope's Hill, and from Regina Road above Codman Square. Finally, the three-deckers on Wellington Hill Road, with their panorama of the Great Blue Hills, claimed the last of Dorchester's major summits in the 1920's.

FUNCTIONAL PERIOD



Functional Period three-deckers form an emphatic streetscape along Morton Street, built as a highway after the First World War.

833-947 Morton Street
1925; Miller and Levi, architects
Prairie-Bungalow Style

CONCLUSION

In the final perspective, it is pure architectural imagination that provides the true quality of Dorchester's three-deckers. Each period has its own innovative solutions to style and streetscape, and each has its own distinctive design and character.

The Formative period is of interest because it is then that the early varieties of three-decker architecture are the boldest, if not always the most successful. Moreover, their rarity adds to their value.

Three-deckers of the Victorian period are among the most exciting in Dorchester for the pure fancy of their architecture. There is an individuality of spirit in a period of decorative excess that makes these three-deckers a colorful delight to the eye - the result of each individual builder seeking to outdo the other. Here the potential of the rhythmic streetscape is first realized; its effect is highly creative.

The most energetic three-deckers are those of the Early Classic period. Here the development of the columned porch, rounded bay, and decorative cornice combine with the pure color and energy of the seemingly infinite streetscape. The result is a marvelous expression of the builder's art and a major source of Dorchester's appeal.

The Late Classic three-deckers are the work of mature craftsmen, familiar with practiced forms. The effects are sometimes sublime, achieved with careful proportion and attention to detail. The street-scapes are truly spectacular statements of three-decker imagery; some achieve their visual power by their sheer length. Although the new Western styles prompted some creative efforts by builders, little was actually done to alter the accepted formula of three-decker design.

The least imaginative are the three-deckers of the Functional Period, the final expression of their architectural form. The economic demands of the period and the conservative minds of the builders dampened experimentation. There are a number of three-deckers that show some effort at creative architectural design, though they are too often lost among the multitude.



PRESERVATION OPPORTUNITIES



Neighborhood pride is evident in this fine Late Classic Period row.

3-11 Freeport Street, Neponset
1911-1918
Colonial Revival Style

PRESERVATION OPPORTUNITIES - AN OVERVIEW

Today the Dorchester three-deckers stand ready to face the future. All are at least fifty years old, most are approaching seventy-five, and some are true octogenarians. Their age has become a matter of serious concern, for they form the dominant housing stock of Dorchester. Ultimately the future of Dorchester lies in their preservation.

The need for preserving Dorchester's three-deckers is a function partly of age and partly of neighborhood. Some of the oldest examples are the best kept, while some of the youngest have suffered the greatest loss. Nevertheless, certain groups need attention if their architectural heritage is to last into the future.

Of the early group from the Formative Period, the most valuable are the Queen Anne examples which evidence such creative architectural effort. Fortunately, most have been maintained and still have their original details intact. Still, if there is concern for the history of the three-decker as well as for its permanent role as housing stock, these should be watched to prevent further loss.

The Victorian period also offers some opportunities. The early streetscapes in the Howell Street-Washburn neighborhood along Dorchester Avenue have been well-kept over the years and have thus retained their architectural value. Other well-maintained examples are those on Armandine and Wendover Streets, which have a good mixture of early types. The only real concern is with the Queen Anne gable examples on Mount Bowdoin and Gaylord Streets which still have the original features that lend such a unique character to the neighborhood.

PRESERVATION OPPORTUNITIES



One of the finest corner storeblocks in Dorchester is this beautifully preserved example of the Early Classic Period.

257-261 Dorchester Avenue, Columbia
1898, T. Edward Sheehan, architect
Colonial Revival Style

The three-deckers of the Early Classic Period form the core of Dorchester's architectural resource. Their elaborate porches are the essence of the three-decker's appeal and will need attention to insure their future. Of the major groups, fortunately most are well-maintained, including the superb streetscapes along Taft Street, Harbor View Avenue, and Sudan, Draper, Hallam Streets. Other groups merit greater concern, most particularly the Dorchester Cornice examples around Meeting House Hill, with their original architectural detailing still intact. These have begun to show their age and every effort should be made to insure their preservation as they represent one of the finest groups of three-deckers in Dorchester. A similar concern is merited by the groups along Geneva Avenue which have great power as a cohesive streetscape. Finally, the three-deckers on Blue Hill Avenue South of Norfolk Street with elegant rounded bays should be preserved to maintain the integrity of the vista into Mattapan.

The Late Classic Period provides the greatest preservation opportunities. The three-deckers are of high quality and are quite numerous, so their impact upon Dorchester is the most important of any group. The best examples have been carefully maintained, such as the excellent rounded-bay sequence on Pleasant Street and the fine streetscape of St. Mark's Road, both classics of their type. Well-kept groups also stand in the Centre-Dix Street neighborhood, and on Pond and Boston Streets. The hill views are the most exciting aspect of the Late Classic three-deckers, and fortunately the finest, Rowell Street and Sawyer Avenue on Jones Hill, and King and Train Streets on Popes Hill, are in a good state of preservation. The same can be said for the landmark three-deckers of Savin Hill at Hubbardston Road and Bayside Street.

PRESERVATION OPPORTUNITIES



Ronan Park provides an attractive setting for three-deckers on Mount Ida.
4-12 Marie Street, Mount Ida
1910; A.R. Gilliland, architect
Colonial Revival Style

However, the streetscapes of Mt. Ida around Ronan Park, on Fox, Juliette, Percival, Marie, and Mt. Ida Streets, need careful attention to preserve their integrity. Other groups meriting similar concern include those at Park Street at Fields Corner, Hancock Street near Kane Square, along the fine curve of Geneva Avenue near Bowdoin, and the landmark set at Talbot Avenue and Argyle Street. A pressing need exists for the three-deckers of Mattapan, especially the cohesive groups on Morton Street, Deering Road, Woolston and Norfolk Streets, that define the architectural character of the area.

The three-deckers of the Functional Period are in least need of immediate concern, although they do require a watchful eye. The best groups have been maintained, including those at South Munroe Terrace on Pope's Hill with their spectacular ocean view, and the fine group on Adams Street near Adams Village. An opportunity for preservation lies with the three-deckers of Wellington Hill and Hosmer Streets in Mattapan, where the integrity of the streetscape is in jeopardy.

These are only the most important preservation opportunities for three-deckers in Dorchester. The appreciation of their architectural quality will, one hopes, spark a larger awareness in the city and increase the three-deckers' value as a legacy and a resource from the past.

APPENDIX I

Three-Decker Builders

Anonymity surrounds the names of the first three-decker builders of the 1870's and 1880's, as the Building Department did not make record of their efforts. Beginning in the 1890's the identity of individual builders begins to emerge from building permit records. Of this early group the most notable were David Campbell and H.S.N. Clark who worked in the Savin Hill and Ashmont neighborhoods, and William Tobin and J. 'Edward Sheehan who built on Meeting House Hill and Mount Bowdoin.

The first groups of three-decker builders became established in Dorchester in the early 1900's. Some were men with building experience from the 1890's who became three-decker architects after the turn of the century, like William H. Besarick and William Duff - a team that built from Jones Hill down to Melville Park. Certainly the most important team in Dorchester between 1900 and 1914 were A.R. Gilliland and Boyd and Berry, who built from Columbia Road to Popes Hill, including most of the three-deckers at Ronan Park. Gilliland was particularly noted for his use of the rounded corner bay. It was he who designed the handsome rounded bay examples in the Pleasant Street neighborhood, and left a legacy of towered three-deckers throughout Dorchester from Savin Hill to Ashmont. Other important architect-builders before the First World War included Patrick O'Hearn working in the area between Uphams Corner and Fields Corner; Timothy J. Lyons who built from Jones Hill and Ronan Park to Franklin Field and Mattapan; and the Douse family, John, George, and Arthur, who worked between Columbia and Ashmont.

As the wave of building activity reached its climax before the First World War a new group of three-decker builders entered the housing market in Dorchester. Notable among this group were William H. Hardy and Frederick Corbett working in the area from Columbia Road to Fields Corner, William F. Byron and William E. Wright on Jones Hill, William Riley, Robert Hamilton and Fred Rockwell between Bowdoin and Meeting House Hill, William H. Crosby, George L. Cook and G.F. Falabella who built in Ashmont and Neponset, F.G. Powell, George L. Cook, and James T. Ball around Codman Square, James Beckwith and the Elter Brothers on Codman Hill, and finally Mary E. Farrell who designed three-deckers in Adams Village.

The development of three-decker neighborhoods in Mattapan attracted a number of builders to the area. The first group were local men working a few projects at a time, such as John Johnson, William Rodd and Henry J. Boden. Others soon joined the building boom, including William E. Clark and C.A. Russell. The scale of construction reached pitch before the First World War with the massive development of entire streets by Silberman Engineering Company and the designs of Samuel S. Levy.

Building activity was slow to recover from the First World War, and a number of established three-decker builders dropped out of business. When construction picked up in the 1920's only William Hardy and Samuel Levy remained from pre-War boom. Yet, there was substantial building and a number of new men entered the market, including

William Dykman and Charles F. Bodge in Neponset and Adams Village,
and S.S. Eisenberg, Saul E. Moffie and Miller & Levi who designed
three-deckers in Mattapan and Mount Bowdoin. The last known three-
deckers were put up in 1930, built by Weinbaum and Wexler along
Sydney Street and A.J. McGillivray on Pierce Street.

APPENDIX II

Three-Decker Imagery

Through most of its history, the three-decker has been an ugly duckling, suffering under a cloud of neglect that only recently has lifted to reveal its true form and quality.

When they were first built at the end of the 19th century, popular writers called them "three-decker tenements" and "architectural monstrosities". By the turn of the 20th century, the Dorchester three-deckers had already attracted the attention of Boston settlement house workers who anxiously declared that the suburban landscape was "retreating before the three-decker". More vehement attacks on its character were sparked by the disastrous fires in nearby Chelsea and Salem which showed the consequences of densely packed wooden houses in older industrial cities. In reaction, the suburban towns of metropolitan Boston invoked bans against the "Menace of the Three-Decker" in the years before the First World War. The reformers called them "unsightly, ugly and cheap," citing the three-deckers of Dorchester as the obvious example. The critical attack continued after the First World War until finally the Great Depression ended further three-decker construction.

Not until well after the Second World War was serious attention given to the three-decker. Enough time had passed and enough evidence remained to warrant the attention of urban historians researching the process of speculative suburban development in 19th century Boston. Still, the historians expressed their cultured bias towards the three-decker, and repeated the image of the "cheap tenements" in scholarly books describing the development of Dorchester at the turn of the century.

The last five years, however, have witnessed a remarkable appreciation of the three-decker. Nineteen-seventy-five proved to be the turning point in the public recognition of the importance of the three-decker to the history of Boston. They appeared as "three-deckers" in national television reports on Boston busing, in massive "triple-decker" studies of urban housing, as "3-Ds" in bicycle guides to the city, as "triple-decker after triple-decker after triple-decker" in a Bicentennial slide show and "People's Architecture" in the Boston 200 guidebook.

The time of the Dorchester triple-decker has now arrived, and it has been the purpose of this report to present a full understanding of its architectural history so that its future preservation may be insured.

APPENDIX III

Survey Methodology

There are literally thousands of three-deckers in Dorchester. Some 5,250 were built within the former boundaries of the town - an approximate figure to be sure, but one which shows the enormous magnitude of the speculative wave that rolled down from South Cove to the Neponset River between 1890 and 1930 when the majority were constructed. The vast expanse of the area, and the sheer numbers involved, make accurate comprehension of the Dorchester three-decker a challenging survey problem, and even more difficult when limited by the short summer and fall season defined in the production of this report. Thus, some manner of abstraction had to be devised to comprehend the full extent of the Dorchester three-decker, to assess its developmental history, the quality of its architectural expression, and the potential for neighborhood preservation.

The first task was literally to map the distribution of every three-decker within Dorchester. Fortunately, the Sanborn Insurance atlases had unconsciously defined the three-decker as a building type according to their designation 3-F; a three-story, wood-frame, multi-family structure. Accordingly the 3-F Sanborn buildings were thus easily plotted on the 200-foot scale Boston Redevelopment Authority base maps for the Dorchester survey area. If anything, the Sanborn classification over-defined a three-decker, working to advantage in locating early prototypes, and included corner store blocks and wood apartments. The only significant error was human exhaustion in the plotting process, later corrected in the field.

The second task was to devise a method for dating the three-deckers as accurately as possible, given the constriction of time and the figures involved. Rather fortuitously, there existed a complete sequence of old real estate atlases for Dorchester that included the entire range of the study period showing every existing building. Published at frequent intervals, the atlases averaged five year revisions during the critical formative stages in the late 19th century (in 1874, 1882, 1884, 1889, 1894, and 1899) while revisions occurred about every ten years in the great building boom of the early 20th century (in 1904, 1910, 1918, and 1933). Thus, the full building cycle of three-decker construction, over a half century from the Depression of 1873 to the Depression of 1933, was bracketed by the Dorchester atlases. Some corners of the survey area were also included in atlases for South Boston (1884, 1891, and 1899), West Roxbury (1896, 1905, 1914, and 1924), and Hyde Park (1912).

Unfortunately, no one library had a complete atlas set, and it was necessary to use the combined facilities of the Massachusetts State Archives, Suffolk County Registry of Deeds, Boston City Building and Real Property Departments, the Boston Public Library, the Boston Athenaeum, and the Harvard University Map Collection. In each, the generosity of the staff in providing work space for these cumbersome volumes was much appreciated.

Once each atlas was secured, the information was then marked in appropriate colored pencil to match the 3-F locations on the Dorchester base maps. By fortunate coincidence, the atlas dates correspond remarkably with the fundamental divisions of style and building cycles in Dorchester. Thus, it was possible to establish a classification that

coincided with the basic periods of three-decker development. Five periods were distinguished, each approximating a decade in length: Formative (1875-1889), Victorian (1890-1899), Early Classic (1900-1910), Late Classic (1911-1918), and Functional (1919-1930). The period names were chosen to describe the essential character of the three-deckers using terms already familiar to the general public. The division points approximate the major developmental events of the three-decker in Dorchester; the Depression of 1873, the electrification of the streetcar lines, the turn of 20th century, the crest of the building wave, the First World War, and the Depression of 1929. Thus, as each cycle of three-decker construction became clearly evident, a complete map of all three-deckers and their atlas dates could be assembled on a single base sheet with each building period standing out in its own color.

The final task was to use the now color-dated base maps for actual field survey. For every atlas cycle, the significant groups, important streets, and major areas were inspected visually in Dorchester, and subsequently the field impressions recorded as written survey notes. Moreover, to insure a complete record of the three-deckers observed, a sequence of colored slides was taken to illustrate the most compelling examples in each time period, so that a selection could be made for a presentation on the Dorchester three-decker.

For the early three-deckers, specifically those built between 1886 and 1904, every effort was made to examine the complete sequence in the field. In a parallel vein, early three-deckers were also mapped and surveyed in South Boston, East Boston, and Roxbury, and thus used as a comparative sample for development in Dorchester during the late 19th century. For the early 20th century three-deckers, the large

speculative groups were also carefully examined in the field in order to comprehend the scale and magnitude of three-decker construction.

In addition, specific dating was undertaken for the most important examples using the building packets recorded in the files of the Boston Building Department. Unfortunately, there were few building records of three-deckers made before 1895, but for the majority built between 1900 and 1930 the names of architects and builders were available at the Building Department. Thus, it was entirely possible to date and map every three-decker in Dorchester, to field survey the majority, to photograph the most important examples, and to research a significant sample in the six month time limit allowed for the production of this report. This methodology will facilitate further survey assessments within Boston and other three-decker neighborhoods in New England cities.

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